

Title: Return
Text: 1 Samuel 7
Theme: Returning to God
Series: 1 Samuel
Prop Stmt: Returning to God brings challenge and rest

Read Text:

“Christianity” in Germany under Hitler was marked by capitulation and egregious compromise. In an effort to not be persecuted, and to be included, many of the clergy failed to faithfully hold to the Scriptures. On the whole, the German church failed the German people and, in an effort, to protect herself from being eradicated, she basically ensured that she was. But there were a few who stood against the tide. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was one. He put his finger on the heart of the issue. The Christianity of the culture was not the Christianity of the Bible. The Christianity of the culture was marked by cheap grace. In his book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, Bonhoeffer demonstrates how inconsistent it is to talk about the gospel without talking about repentance. A gospel without repentance is cheap grace and cheap grace is not real grace and therefore it is not good news. Only a gospel with true repentance is good news. Bonhoeffer described cheap grace as “*the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner.*” In other words, cheap grace is promising forgiveness to the transgressor but the transgressor never has to change, which is why cheap grace is “the deadly enemy of our church.” Bonhoeffer wrote,

Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

We want relief from the consequences of our sin without whole-hearted repentance. I was very new to being in the ministry when I met a guy for lunch who claimed to be a believer and told me that he was being unfaithful to his wife. He said that it was a lot easier for him to put a generous amount of money in the offering every week than break off his affair. I was naïve; I did not realize people thought that way. It was his way of making up for his sin, except that, it doesn't.

Up until this point, the book of 1 Samuel is a continuation of the book of Judges. Israel, as a whole continues in her idolatry and continues to suffer the consequences for it. There are isolated examples of faithfulness, like Hannah who against overwhelming odds and circumstances tilted decisively against her, has a relentless faith in God. Her son, Samuel is recognized by the country as a prophet of God. His words have integrity because he has refused to capitulate to the culture and just go along with what everyone else is doing. Instead, he rebukes them and calls them to return to Yahweh. But, would they listen? For three chapters now, we don't hear anything about Samuel. But Samuel has not been idle. The end of the chapter tells us that he has been making the rounds in Israel and has been preaching and obviously, calling the people to repentance. The long burden of oppression is bearing fruit. The

loss of the Ark and its partial return (to the land but not to the Tabernacle) is weighing on the people. There is a growing sense of lament, but this time, the lament looks different. In the past, the people had remorse because of the consequences of their sin, now it looks as if they are starting to long after God which means they lament their sin, not just its effects.

1. Returning to God is marked by faithful preaching. (2-4)

I am so grateful for Samuel's faithful preaching. He says what the people need to hear. Look at verse 3. The heart of this chapter is found in 3 phrases that capture the 3 parts of what it means to return to God or to turn to God. Notice the three things Samuel says. 1) Put away the foreign gods – wholehearted repentance; 2) direct your heart to the LORD – wholehearted commitment; and 3) serve him only – wholehearted worship. The first two describe conversion, the third describes result, purpose and God's goal.

A. **Wholehearted Repentance** (3a)

Repentance means to change your mind, change your affections and change your direction. Samuel's preaching is very politically incorrect. Yahweh does not co-exist with other gods. If you are going to return to God, if you are going to be serious about following God, then you have to put away the foreign gods and the Ashtaroth from among you. This is called, wholehearted repentance. This is not feeling bad because your life stinks, or feeling remorse because you hurt someone. This is a wholehearted change of mind that views your sin as your enemy instead of your friend. For Israel, like us, this was really hard. The Philistines worshiped Dagon. The Canaanites worshiped Baal and Baal's companion Asherah. Baal was considered to be the son of Dagon and he controlled the weather while Asherah controlled fertility. If you wanted a large harvest, you better get Baal's help and if you wanted children, which were really helpful in farming your land, then you needed Asherah's help. These fertility cults made a religion of prostitution and immorality. They not only normalized it, they championed it. Sexual immorality was part of their religious life. All of this is bogus. But, the power of fear and the power of pleasure is strong. It is why so many people don't want to give up their sin. It is their god! What if I don't keep the idols happy? I won't be able to get a crop and I won't be able to pay my taxes to the Philistines and they will hurt me and my family. We saw from the book of Judges what happened when Gideon stood up for Yahweh and tore down the local Baal idol. His fellow townspeople wanted to kill him. But idolatry is more subtle than worshiping the wrong god. Idolatry is also worshiping the true God in the wrong way. Repentance means to get rid of everything that I am trusting in to make me whole, or significant, or influential, or in control, or desired or loved or worshiped. These gods had traditions, ceremonies and places of worship that were in homes, villages, sides of roads and paths. Israel had become full of idolatry. But clearly it wasn't working out for them. But turning to God meant that they had to get rid of these other gods. They had to change their mind and view these as false gods. They had to change their affections. I am not going to put the weight of my happiness on them. I will no longer look to these gods to give me what I have wanted. And therefore, they had to change the way they lived. No more gods in the house. No more going to the temples or places of

worship. No more participating in the ceremonies even if gramma and the cousins still do it. No more! I can't worship God and other things. But, turning from idols means that you turn to God.

B. Wholehearted Commitment (3b)

Repentance without commitment to God (faith in God) will result in substituting one idol for another. Satan doesn't care if you give up the god of alcohol for the god of self-righteousness or self-improvement. All of them will damn you just the same. The reason for repentance is so that you will direct your heart to the LORD. Directing your heart to the Lord means to run after, pursue, be tenaciously loyal to God, no matter what. Instead of trusting in anything else, we are to trust in God. This is what Samuel is preaching. Trust in God to provide for you what you need.

Taken together, wholehearted repentance and wholehearted commitment is the OT description of NT conversion. Repentance has been described as being the porch, and faith is the door. In order to get into the house of genuine Christianity I go through the porch of repentance and the door of faith. I turn from my sin and I turn to Christ. I believe on Christ to forgive me of my sins because I realize that my sins are evil and that I am a sinner who needs to be forgiven and changed. I don't ask God to forgive me of my sin, like I would ask someone to pay off my credit card balance so I can just go out and spend more. No, I go in another direction. The result is a complete reorientation of a person's life.

Joey is owned by alcohol and tends to get drunk a lot and do really bad things that just wreaks havoc in his life and in his family. He is a nice guy, has some good skills and if he could just get past this drinking thing, he could have such a good future. Someone tells Joey that he needs Jesus. The truth is, Joey does need Jesus. But Joey's biggest issue is not drinking, it is the fact that Joey is a sinner who is trying to handle life on his own and it is clearly not working. Joey is tempted to ask Jesus to help him handle the drinking thing, so Joey can get on with living his life without this huge weakness that has caused so many problems. Again, Satan does not care if Joey goes to hell sober or drunk. Jesus did not die on the cross so Joey could not be an alcoholic but instead be a self-centered business man. The ultimate issue for Joey (and for Israel as we will see and for you and me) is, who or what are you going to worship? Who or what are you going to make much of? Whose fame and glory do you live for? If Joey wants to live for his own fame and glory and his weakness for alcohol is ruining his life, then Joey is tempted to try to use Jesus to help him get over his weakness so he can pursue his own glory and fame. Jesus didn't die on the cross for that.

Now, let's say that Joey begins to realize that alcohol is just one expression of trying to handle life apart from God and Joey sees that his whole life has been about himself and he realizes that he needs Christ. He needs to turn not just from one sin, but he needs to turn away from all of his sin, all of his selfishness, self-centeredness, etc. and turn to Christ, and he does! Some in Joey's family may think, how wonderful this is that Joey is doing so much better. They don't care if it was Jesus, Buddha, or LeBron James, that helped Joey. They see Jesus as one of many tools to help get the life that you want. But Joey realizes Jesus is not a tool for life, he is life.

This is wholehearted repentance and wholehearted commitment. You turn from sin in order to turn to Christ. Joey's family and friends just want him to turn from the problem. They want him to improve himself and they don't realize that they have the same heart, the same need. It's just that their hearts are covered by the clothing of a respectable life. But, repentance and commitment are for the purpose of a life that is being lived for the ultimate purpose God made us! God made us to worship him and enjoy him forever. The third phrase, "serve him only" means to worship God.

C. **Wholehearted and Full throttled Worship (3c)**

God made you to know him, enjoy him and find your delight and satisfaction in him. This is what it means to worship God. We recognize his worth, his glory, his good, his plans and purposes and we love him, trust him, and make much of him. When Dagon kept falling down before the Ark, and when the Philistines broke out in tumors, they feared God. They recognized his power, but they did not love God, nor worship him. The purpose of repentance and commitment is SO THAT you will worship God and enjoy him forever! In order to worship him and serve him, you have to worship him and serve him only! If you try to hold on to your idols, then your worship of God will be half-hearted and reluctant. You know this about yourself. If your heart is being enticed or captured by other things, then your affections for God are cooled, your intensity and focus in singing is dimmed, your attention to prayer is non-existent, your confession of sin is ignored, your interest in sharing the gospel is gone, and your passion for missions is empty. God does not want reluctant submission. God is worth your whole-hearted embrace! He is good and right to demand it and to demand it exclusively. "serve him only."

Dads, let's say that your son wants to buy a truck or a car that you know is not a good investment, but he wants it and he just won't listen to you and in fact he thinks that you are against him because you don't "support him." It's actually the complete opposite of that. It is because you do love him and want the best for him that you are willing to tell him the truth about what he wants. Or, again, let's say that your daughter wants to be in a relationship with a guy that you know is bad news. The dude is a loser and will bring her nothing but grief, but she doesn't want to hear it. She accuses you of hating her because you don't support what she thinks she loves. Again, it is the complete opposite. God is good and right to demand your complete worship because anything and everything else will betray you. Israel was able to see and feel some of that. Baal had not delivered them from the Philistines.

"the hand of the Philistines" (3d) was a hard, but good schoolmaster that taught Israel that God is their only hope. Would they be humble enough to admit it and change? Look at v.4. The answer is yes!

2. **Returning to God is marked by taking God's Word to heart.** (5-6)

This is a revival. People from all over the country gather at Mizpah. God was moving in the hearts of the people and there was a desire to come together, repent, mourn, confess, fast, sacrifice. Samuel preached and prayed. He prayed to God on their behalf and for them. The

people publicly confessed to God that “We have sinned against the LORD.” So often in the book of Judges, the people “turn” to God in order to get rid of their enemies, but the turning to God was in name only. It never really lasted. In fact, it looked a lot like Pharaoh whose commitment lasted until the plague ended. Then when the pressure was over, he was back to his own ways. Here, Israel was getting serious about God.

Put away the Baals and the Ashtaroah is a big deal. These idols are “valuable”. The temples and shrines were historic, there were priests and cult prostitutes to deal with. This was complicated, but it was happening. The nation was returning to God. Against so many odds, faith in God was reborn. But when the people of God turn to God and in fact, come together in humble unity before God, you can expect the enemies of God to attack. There is nothing more powerful on this earth, than when the people of God are in prayer to God. They have not gathered at Mizpah as an army, but the Philistines have been monitoring their movements and when they see an otherwise fractured nation coming together, they decide that they have to attack.

3. Returning to God invites attacks from the enemies of God. (7-14)

This appears to be the opposite of what Samuel said in v.3. But, in reality it was God’s way of testing them and then answering that prayer. I think that verse 8 is very insightful. Instead of demanding that Samuel organize an army to defend them, they plead with Samuel to keep praying. Isn’t that beautiful!? They really believe that God and only God is their hope. So, Samuel offered a sacrifice and he cried out to the LORD for Israel.

Now, think about this. Samuel is a prophet, a priest and a judge (king). He is a remarkable person, but don’t forget that he is a person. He is human. The last time that Israel had any measurable success against the Philistines was in the days of Samson and that wasn’t for too long and that was likely 100-150 years ago. This looks bad. The Philistines had gathered for war and Samuel would be at the top of their hit list. Samuel, do you believe? Do you believe what you have been preaching? If the people were going to be rely completely upon God, they needed a leader who would. Look at v.10. “As Samuel was offering up the burnt offering, the Philistines drew near to attack Israel.” That is some intense faith. ***Samuel is looking to the sacrifice of an innocent lamb as his salvation.*** What happens to people who throw themselves completely upon Christ? They are saved. Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved. So, what god was supposedly the god of thunder? Baal. How does God choose to rescue Israel? By means of thunder! The Philistines were routed that day. This was an incredible and decisive victory. It was so overwhelming that Israel recovered the cities that had been taken and the land. In fact, the Amorites decided to negotiate a truce.

(Invite deacons, deaconesses and Elders forward) We are prone to forget who God is and what He has done for us. Samuel knew this, so he set up a stone and called it Ebenezer (which means stone of help). Don’t forget that it was right here where the Lord delivered us.

Conclusion:

- What do you need to repent of? When will you?

- What are you trusting in for your salvation?
- What are some stories that you can share with your family and friends that are your stones of help, the markers that remind you of the times when God rescued you?